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Yes, subjective norms are important, but let's not lose sight of cultural differences

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A contribution to the Special Issue on Norms,
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It is very encouraging that the authors of this special issue are giving renewed attention to the contribution of social norms to the creation and maintenance of culture. Such a focus has long been called for (Pepitone, 1976), but rarely achieved up to the present. Focusing on norms is one way of recontextualizing social psychology, and another is to make sure in our studies that we sample a full range of social contexts. To date, the great majority of studies of subjective norms have been conducted within single cultural settings, typically within North America or East Asia, and often with student respondents. There is an implicit assumption that subjective norms are either equally important everywhere (Wan, this issue; Gao et al, this issue; Shteynberg, this issue), or else that they are essentially similar but differ in strength across cultures (e.g., Shteynberg et al., 2009; Tam et al., 2012). These studies are an advance on the earlier basic finding that conformity levels vary with culture (Bond & Smith, 1996), because they do measure the postulated causal mechanism directly. However, they leave open conceptual issues as to how best to understand variations in which types of norm might be relevant to a given cultural setting.

For instance, a distinction is often made between descriptive or subjective norms on the one hand and prescriptive or injunctive norms on the other hand. This

parallels the contrast between informational and normative influence employed by early conformity researchers. Subjective norms can provide guidelines in ambiguous or ill-defined settings such as laboratory experiments and in cultures guided by autonomy values. Prescriptive norms will be more salient in settings that are longer lasting and guided by collectivistic values and in settings where real or imagined penalties are in place for those who transgress. As Morris and Liu (this issue) suggest, subjective norms may evolve into prescriptive norms over time, but it seems likely that this would occur more rapidly in some cultural contexts than others. In settings where analytic modes of thinking are favored, the distinction between these two types of norm is easy enough to make. In the collectivistic settings where more holistic modes of thinking are favored, I would speculate that the distinction would be more rapidly blurred or lost. Thus it is possible that the greater salience of subjective norms found in Asian samples for instance by Tam et al. could arise because any perceived subjective norm has a more prescriptive overtone than would be the case among North American samples.

Gelfand and Harrington (this issue) explore predominantly individual-level motives likely to enhance reliance on subjective norms. Their perspective has equal potential when applied more directly to dimensions of culture-level variability. For instance, motives to manage uncertainty and threat are likely to be particularly prevalent in cultures high on uncertainty avoidance as defined by Hofstede (2001). In a similar way, motives to manage impressions would be especially salient in cultures that are collectivistic and tight rather than loose, and motives relating to power would be particularly relevant in cultures high on power distance. Each of these contexts are ones in which repeated attention to norms of the type discussed by Shteynberg (this issue) is especially likely. Tests of these speculations would required targeted

sampling of settings known to be high and low on these dimensions of culture. There is a strong case for making such tests at the level of contrasting cultures because doing so is likely to encompass greater degrees of variance in normativeness than is typical within a single setting.

We have as yet few studies of subjective norms that sample cultures widely, and little agreement as to what types of descriptive norms would be the right ones to sample. Most such studies have focused on subjective norms for value dimensions (House et al., 2004) and these find low levels of consensus as to what is normative at the national level (Fischer et al., 2009). Of course, there are relatively few occasions on which one might wish to think of oneself in terms of nation-level norms. National cultures are more likely to differ from one another in the salience of the subjective norms of more proximal groups and subcultures. We may also do better to focus less on norms concerning abstract variables such as values, whose behavioral implications can be interpreted variously, and more on norms about specific behaviors. For instance, Matsumoto et al. (2008) have identified substantial variation in norms about expression of specific emotions in differing contexts across 32 nations. This study showed that individualism-collectivism could explain substantial differences in the ways that subjective norms prescribed behavior toward in-groups and toward out-groups. This provides a key illustration of the relevance of social context in our conceptualization of subjective norms. Which are the contexts from which we consider it relevant to derive information as to what is normative? It would be valuable to link the collective representation perspective of Wan (this issue) with the types of data assembled by Matsumoto et al. (2008).

I would argue that to achieve a full understanding of the role of norms we need to seek out settings where they are especially salient, and where deviance is

sanctioned. We have some understanding of their differing content and importance in face, honor and dignity cultures (Leung & Cohen, 2011), and in relation to intergroup conflicts (DeRidder & Tripathi, 1992). Focus on the face cultures of East Asia encourages us to think predominantly of conformity, but as Morris and Liu (this issue) discuss, there are contexts where the balance of priorities can favor deviance rather than conformity. For instance, in high power distance cultures there is potential for the presence also of perverse norms. These are injunctive norms that are frequently violated (traffic speed limits provide an everyday example), but which high power persons can capriciously enforce or threaten to enforce, in ways that sustain their personal power (Fernandez-Dols, 2002).

Study of subjective norms certainly holds much promise for gaining a fuller understanding of the genesis and maintenance of culture and cultural differences. To derive full benefit from this initiative, it will be important to follow the lead of those (e.g., Zou, Tam, Morris, et al., 2009) who have made a promising start on broadening sampling frames and testing the predictive validity of norms competitively against existing conceptualizations such as those based upon values and beliefs.

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